

A History of
The Office of the State Land Board
HI64



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Michigan's present Capitol, the state's third, opened on January 1, 1879, to great acclaim.

Image Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan

The Golden Age of Capitol Construction

The Michigan State Capitol was built during the golden age of Capitol construction in the years following the American Civil War. From its inception, the building was designed to serve several functions and roles for the state. First, and most importantly, it is the official seat of government for the State of Michigan. It is a public forum where people can express their opinions, and a symbol of governmental traditions and the state itself. Yet the Capitol is also, at its very essence, an office building, where the day-to-day functions of government have played out for well over a century.

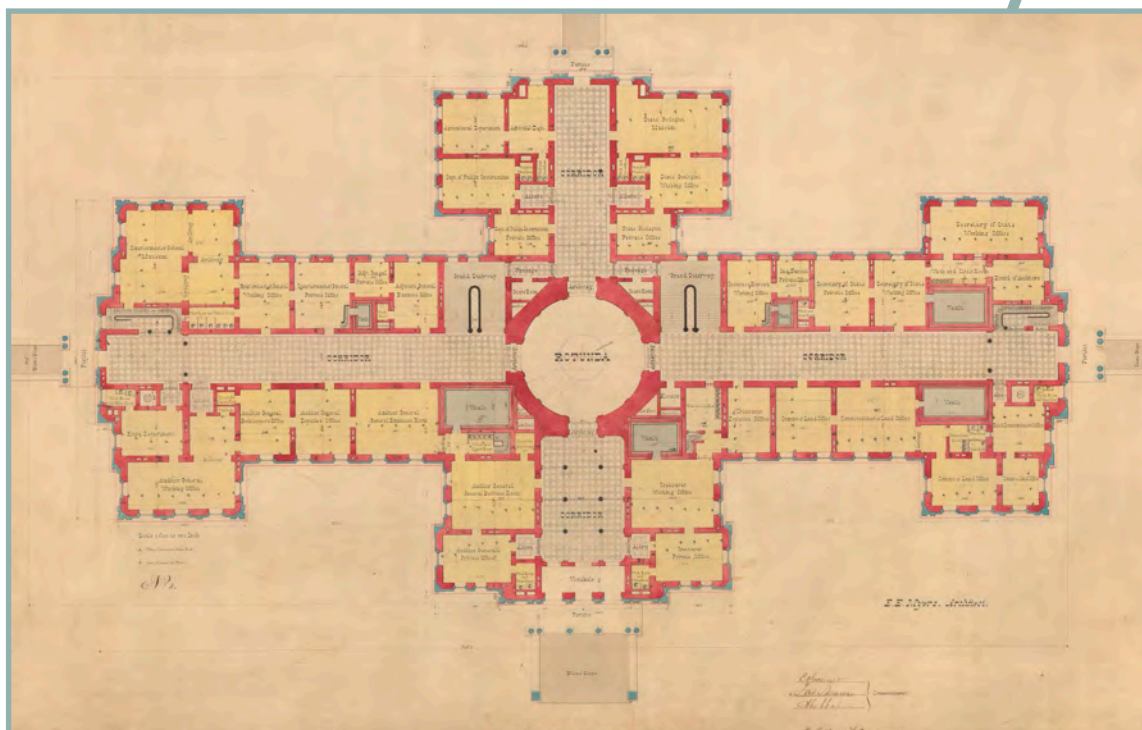
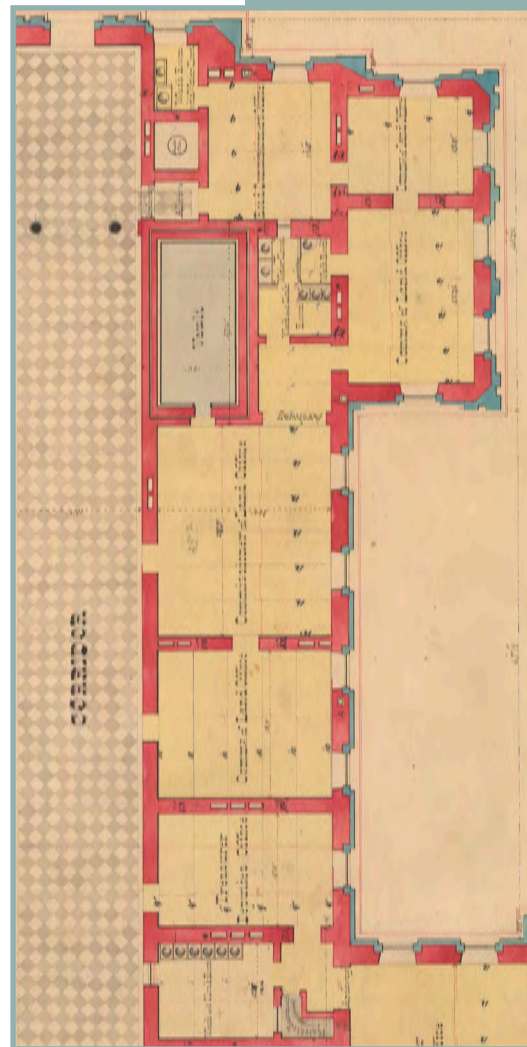
When the Capitol first opened in 1879, it was state government's only active office building, where all three branches of government were housed. The executive branch, including the Governor, State Treasurer, Secretary of State, State Librarian, Auditor General, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the Adjutant General, claimed most of the offices within it. The judicial branch was represented by the Supreme Court, which occupied offices and an elegant chamber in the east wing of the third floor. The legislative branch used the House and Senate Chambers, the largest and most impressive rooms in the Capitol, as well as offices for the Secretary of the Senate, the Clerk of the House, and a few committee rooms. There were no offices for individual legislators, who, when in Lansing for brief part-time legislative sessions, worked from their desks on the chamber floors.

The Land Office and Swamp Land Office

The suite for the State Land Office and the Swamp Land Office was among the largest in the new Capitol building. Designed by Capitol architect Elijah E. Myers, the space occupied the bulk of the east side of the north wing, on the first floor. Original floor plans suggest that it probably contained eight rooms, two of which were water closets and cloak rooms. This area was also home to a large windowless document vault in which valuable and important papers and ledgers could be stored.¹

The first man to lead the State Land Office in the new Capitol was English-born James M. Neasmith, who immigrated with his parents to the United States as a boy. Neasmith relocated from the east to Michigan in his adulthood, and established a productive farm on the west side of the state. He served in a number of local and county level offices before Kalamazoo County voters sent him to the Michigan State Senate in 1870 and 1872.² In 1878 he was elected the new Commissioner of the State Land Office, a position he held for two (two-year) terms.³

According to the State Auditor's 1879 report, Neasmith shared his Capitol office suite with Deputy Commissioner Henry S. Sleeper, Bookkeeper William Ennis, Draughtsman J.E. Sherman, Regular Clerk L.H. Briggs, and six extra clerks. One of these clerks—George Neasmith—was probably James's son, as it was not uncommon to see the spouses, children, nieces, and nephews of state office holders working with their relation.⁴ Together these men worked to sell and administer the state's vast tracks of undeveloped land.



The Capitol's original hand inked floor plans still survive in the Archives of Michigan. The first floor plan included suggested locations for each departmental office—some of which were ultimately changed.

Image Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan

Like the rest of the Capitol, this suite was designed to be both functional and beautiful, as befitted a growing and prosperous state. “The offices throughout are elegantly fitted up,” a reporter wrote following his visit on January 1, 1879, for the Capitol’s official dedication. “All of the doors are massive in finish, and fitted with locks specially made to order and being on bronze hinges, and bearing the arms of the state.”⁵ Passing through the main doorway, visitors stepped onto a colorful Brussels wool wall-to-wall carpet, laid in strips and carefully sewn together by hand. Sturdy and tasteful polished walnut desks, chairs, tables, and bookcases stood at attention, ready for use. Tall windows, framed by crisp wooden pocket shutters, ushered in natural light, while elegant new gas chandeliers, purchased from the Mitchell Vance Company in New York, gleamed overhead.

Early Changes

As might be expected, changes to these offices, and the rest of the Capitol, were constant. Two major improvements were launched in the 1880s, only a few years after the building opened. First, starting in 1885, electricians began wiring the Capitol for a new technology—electric lights. Prior to this, the Capitol was lighted entirely by gas fixtures. That same year, painters began to decorate the Capitol’s plain white plaster walls with an array of rich colors and ornate designs. Slowly, every room, including those used by the State Land Office, was transformed by artists who stenciled, grained, marbled, and striped beautiful motifs on the walls and ceilings.

In 1892, the Board of State Auditors directed the Superintendent of the Capitol to survey the building and its contents. He recorded his findings in their annual bound report, which survives to this day. The completed inventory lists each and every desk, chair, table, bookshelf, umbrella stand, and cuspidor (spittoon) in the building. It also lists a basic function for each space within the respective suites, though unfortunately the designations are not shown on actual floorplans, leaving questions about which specific room was in fact being used for each purpose.

At the time of the 1892 survey, the State Land Office suite consisted of the Commissioner’s Office, a Private Office, a Drafting Room, an Office, and a Deputy’s Office. (No mention is made of the “Swamp Land Office.”) Among the items housed in these rooms were at least ten desks, twenty-six chairs, eight bookcases, three umbrella racks, two pairs of window curtains and fixtures, clocks, step ladders, a Pebody thermometer, a caligraph (typewriter) and, for the use of the Commissioner, a folding bed. The last object serves as a reminder that most of the Commissioners of the Land Office did not live in Lansing, and in some cases, served as somewhat absent figureheads. Instead, their deputies, who were often local men, administered the office and oversaw its staff.⁶

This early Capitol Directory survives in the Jenison Collection, a series of six scrapbooks compiled to record the Capitol’s construction by historian and collector O.A. Jenison.

Image Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan



The Early Twentieth Century

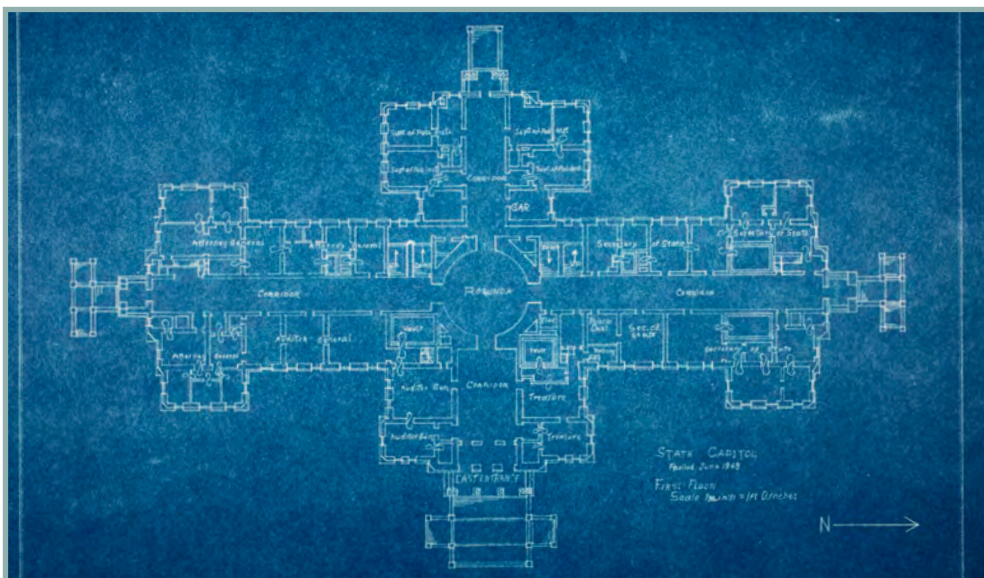
The turn of the twentieth century brought a shrinking work load for the State Land Commissioner, as much of Michigan's acreage had already been sold. In 1914 Augustus C. Carton, the last man to serve as Commissioner wrote that "the office has performed its functions and outlived its usefulness. The small amount of land which now remains the property of the State should be used for the benefit of the people of the State as a whole and should not pass into the hands of private individuals. The lands remaining the property of the State . . . are suitable for the growing of forests and for game refuges . . . (and) can be used as camping grounds . . . Let us hope that . . . the remnant of Michigan's great holdings are preserved to the people as a whole for their use and benefit."⁷

During this period, the following State Land Commissioners worked in this office.⁸

1879-1882	James M. Neasmith
1883-1886	Minor C. Newell
1887-1890	Roscoe D. Dix
1891-1892	George T. Shaffer
1893-1894	John G. Barry
1894-1900	William A. French
1901-1904	Edwin A. Wildey
1905-1908	William H. Rose
1909-1912	Huntley Russell
1913-1914	Augustus C. Carton

The Mid-Twentieth Century

The next time the office appeared in the known historical record was in 1941, when the State Treasurer's office surveyed the Capitol and inventoried the number of people, pieces of furniture, and machines in the building. By this time, the suite had been divided between the State Treasurer, who used the two southernmost rooms, and the Secretary of State, who acquired the remainder. (In fact, logic suggests that these departments may have moved into this space as early as 1914, when the Land Commission officially dissolved.) The 1941 floor plans show that the rooms were now identified as 110, 111, 112, 112A, 113, and 113A.



By the 1940s, space in the increasingly crowded Capitol was at a premium. Only the largest, most powerful departments retained their Capitol suites, while smaller divisions used rooms in the State Office Building, or in rented quarters downtown.

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Image Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan

The accompanying index notes that there were eight people, eleven desks, one table, and nineteen files in the Treasurer's portion of the wing. In contrast the Secretary of State packed forty-six people, forty-six desks, six tables, seven files, four machines, and one bookcase into his area.⁹

Two years later, Treasury repeated the exercise. This time they included not only the number of people, pieces of furniture, and machines housed in each office in 1943, but also in 1940. The accompanying index provides contradictory information about the two southernmost rooms. According to the floor plan, these two rooms had fallen under the domain of the Secretary of State. However, the accompanying index still lists rooms 110 and 111 as part of the Treasurer's suite.¹⁰ The index states that the Treasurer's two rooms were home to ten people, nine desks, three tables, twenty-four files, two machines, and one bookcase. The Secretary of State's northeast suite housed eleven people (a significant reduction), eighteen desks, four tables, twenty-eight files (a significant increase), five machines, and two bookcases.

Interestingly, the 1943 index also included statistics for the offices in 1940, when the Treasurer's two north wing rooms contained sixteen people, seventeen desks, four tables, twenty-two files, one machine, and one bookcase. Forty-six people, forty-three desks, six tables, (only) seven files, and four machines could be found in the Secretary of State's area.

In 1957, architect George R. Page prepared another set of mid-century drawings for the Buildings and Construction Division of the Michigan State Administration Board. Page noted that the Treasurer still had two rooms in the north wing, thereby clearing up the confusion around the 1943 inventory. His plans also included a new numbering system, in which the entire block of rooms (some of which had been both vertically and horizontally subdivided) were identified as 105, 106, 107, 107A, 108, 108A, 109, 109A, 109B, 109C, and 109D.¹¹

During this period, the following State Treasurers and Secretaries of State worked in these offices.¹²

State Treasurers

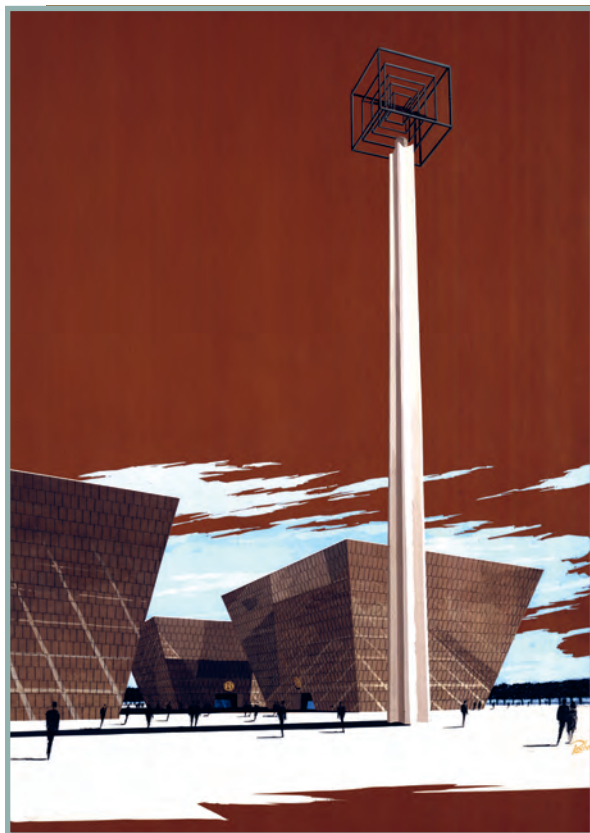
1941-1942	Theodore I. Fry
1943-1954	D. Hale Brake
1955-1965	Sanford A. Brown
1965-1978	Allison Green

Secretaries of State

1939-1942	Harry F. Kelly
1943-1946	Herman H. Dignan
1947-1952	Fred M. Alger, Jr.
1953-1954	Owen J. Cleary
1955-1971	James M. Hare

The Legislature Moves In

The late 1960s and early 1970s were times of great change in the Capitol building. After ninety years of shuffling, squeezing, and relocating, the decision was made to dramatically remodel many of the offices in the Capitol. The action was motivated by a number of factors, including the state's move to a full-time legislature. This had dramatic repercussions for the Capitol building, where the pace of business in both House and Senate spaces increased significantly. As the number of legislators spending every week in Lansing rose, the call for additional office space reached a fever pitch. In order to accommodate all of these members, space had to be found—preferably in the Capitol. Governor Romney's preferred solution called for the construction of a new Capitol. While significant steps were taken towards this ambitious goal, ultimately the project was tabled over cost and aesthetic concerns.



Several of the plans considered for the new Capitol in the 1960s contained three buildings—designed to house and symbolize the three branches of government—and a central pylon.

Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection

*By the 1960s,
rooms in this suite
were being used for
committees . . .*

When it became clear that a new Capitol was not to be, a new solution was proposed. Why not dramatically remodel the Capitol's offices and committee rooms? The timing seemed ideal, as several of the building's longtime departmental occupants, including the Office of the Secretary of State and State Treasurer, were moving out of the Capitol and into other buildings in downtown Lansing.

A scheme was developed to capture new space in the old building by subdividing the rooms in half to create two ten-foot high offices, one above the other. From 1969 to 1972, almost every office on the Capitol's first, second, and third floors received an overfloor (sometimes also called half floors, or mezzanines). At the same time, offices were modernized by adding drop ceilings, fluorescent lighting, and institutional carpeting and furnishings. Original decorative paint had already been covered under layers of overpaint, paneling, and wallpaper. Almost every vestige of the Capitol's original elegance and character had disappeared.

Office Occupants

By the mid 1960s, rooms in this suite were being used for committees and legislative offices. A survey of the legislative handbooks from 1965-1990 indicates that the following committees and members worked in this space over the years.

Please note that the district numbers in the table reflect those in use at the time each respective handbook was printed.¹⁴

1965-1966	Education Committee			Rm. 107
	General Taxation Committee			Rm. 107
	State Library Committee			Rm. 107
1967-1968	Agriculture Committee			Rm. 105
	Civil Rights Committee			Rm. 105
	Private Corporations Committee			Rm. 105
	Public Safety Committee			Rm. 105
	Revision and Amendment of the Constitution Committee			Rm. 105
	Education Committee			Rm. 107
	Insurance Committee			Rm. 107
	Labor Committee			Rm. 107
	Liquor Control Committee			Rm. 107
	Roads and Bridges Committee			Rm. 107
1969-1970	Rep. George H. Edwards	12th District	Detroit	Rm. 105
	Rep. Albert A. Kramer	67th District	Oak Park	Rm. 105
	Rep. George D. Montgomery	20th District	Detroit	Rm. 105
	Rep. Albert R. Horrigan	82nd District	Flint	Rm. 106
	Rep. Josephine D. Hunsinger	16th District	Detroit	Rm. 106
1971-1972	Rep. George H. Edwards	12th District	Detroit	Rm. 105
	Rep. George D. Montgomery	20th District	Detroit	Rm. 105
1973-1974	Rep. George H. Edwards	9th District	Detroit	Rm. 105
	Rep. Michael A. Dively	104th District	Traverse City	Rm. 106
	Rep. F. Robert Edwards	79th District	Flint	Rm. 106
	Rep. R. Robert Geake	35th District	Northville	Rm. 106
	Rep. Mark L. Thompson	106th District	Alpena	Rm. 106 ½
1975-1976	Rep. George H. Edwards	9th District	Detroit	Rm. 105
	Rep. F. Robert Edwards	79th District	Flint	Rm. 106
1977-1978	Rep. Gilbert J. DiNello	73rd District	East Detroit	Rm. 105
	Rep. Mark Siljander	42nd District	Three Rivers	Rm. 106
	Rep. Michael Conlin	23rd District	Jackson	Rm. 108
1979-1980	Rep. Claude A. Trim	60th District	Davisburg	Rm. 105
	Rep. Mark Siljander	42nd District	Three Rivers	Rm. 106
	Rep. Steve Andrews	106th District	Wolverine	Rm. 108

1981-1982	Rep. Claude A. Trim	60th District	Davisburg	Rm. 105
	Rep. Steve Andrews	106th District	Wolverine	Rm. 108
1983-1984	Rep. Richard G. Fitzpatrick	49th District	Battle Creek	Rm. 105
	Rep. Colleen Engler	99th District	Mt. Pleasant	Rm. 108
1985-1986	Rep. Richard G. Fitzpatrick	49th District	Battle Creek	Rm. 105
	Rep. Phillip E. Hoffman	23rd District	Horton	Rm. 106
	Rep. Colleen Engler	99th District	Mt. Pleasant	Rm. 108
1987-1988	Rep. Carolyn C. Kilpatrick	8th District	Detroit	Rm. 105
	Rep. Lyn R. Bankes	35th District	Livonia	Rm. 106
	Rep. Gary L. Randall	89th District	Elwell	Rm. 108
	Rep. John G. Strand	84th District	Lapeer	Rm. 108
1989-1990	Rep. Carolyn C. Kilpatrick	8th District	Detroit	Rm. 105
	Rep. Lyn R. Bankes	35th District	Livonia	Rm. 106
	Rep. Gary L. Randall	89th District	Elwell	Rm. 108
	Rep. John G. Strand	84th District	Lapeer	Rm. 108
1991-1992	<i>The office is not listed in the 1991 Legislative Handbook and Directory, as the offices were then undergoing restoration.</i>			

The Capitol's Restoration

In 1987, the Michigan Senate and the House of Representatives began the process of restoring Michigan's Capitol. Chief among their goals was to return the building to its original Victorian grandeur while modernizing the many outdated systems within it. They sought to make the Capitol a living, working museum, where the functions of government would continue to play out in a beautiful and inspiring historical setting. In order to carry out this mission, the restoration team, made up of supportive elected officials, architects, craftspeople, and artists, would need to touch every single space in the Capitol, including the old Secretary of State's suite.

Changes came swiftly. Overfloors and suspended ceilings were removed, returning the height of the rooms to their full twenty-two feet. Tradespeople rerouted and disguised ductwork, wiring, and sprinkler heads. Appropriate carpeting, designed using colors and patterns from the Victorian era, and period inspired furnishings, were crafted and installed. Skilled designers and craftspeople used photographs to recreate original gas lighting fixtures removed in the early twentieth century. New windows, neatly trimmed with appropriate wood shutters and draperies, replaced old.

Offices, corridors, and even the lobby into the House Chamber, seen here, were sliced in half horizontally to create additional office space in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection



Of particular importance to the restoration was the recreation of the Capitol's historic decorative artwork. Michigan's Capitol contains approximately nine acres of hand painted art. A variety of techniques were used in the building when it was decorated in the 1880s, including stenciling, striping, marbling, and gilding. Over the years, the artwork was painted over many times as styles changed. For the first time, careful research was done to determine the original colors and decorative paint motifs found in these rooms. These colors and motifs were then replicated by talented decorative artists who used traditional techniques to return the room to a proper late nineteenth century appearance.

One of the techniques used in this space is that of wood graining. The original Capitol building commissioners made the decision to use white pine as the dominant wood throughout the building. White pine was relatively inexpensive and available in abundance in this period. They did not intend, however, for people to recognize the wood as pine. Once the pine was installed, it was woodgrained—that is, painted carefully to mimic a more expensive wood—by talented artists. In the Capitol, painters transformed yards of humble pine by painting it with the grain of walnut, the most fashionable (and therefore rather expensive) choice of the 1870s. The technique that they used was replicated by modern decorative painters during the restoration. They labored many hours to apply the necessary seven layers of paint needed to mimic the late nineteenth century process.

The restoration of the Capitol was completed in the fall of 1992. Rededication ceremonies held on November 19 and 20 of that year celebrated the success of the project, which won many significant state and national preservation awards. That same fall, the building was officially designated a National Historic Landmark, the highest honor accorded historic structures in America.



Decorative painters from across the country and around the world labored to recreate acres of decorative motifs. Much of the Capitol's most elaborate art can be found on or near the ceilings, which emphasizes the impressive height of the rooms.

Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection

Early attempts at graining the Capitol's woodwork using rags produced dark, cloudy surfaces. Soon artists began using brushes for a cleaner, crisper, better defined grain.

Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection



The restoration of the Capitol was completed in the fall of 1992.

Post Restoration Use

The completion of the Capitol's restoration brought with it the need to resolve matters concerning the identification and future use of the Capitol's rooms, including this House suite. A new numbering system, devised by Capitol Preservation Architect Richard C. Frank, was introduced indicating the ownership of the space (House, Senate, Executive, etc.) and the room's number. Today the suite is numbered H160, H162, H164, H166, H170, H172, H172A, and H172B.

The following members have served in this suite since the Capitol's restoration.¹⁵

1993-1994	Rep. Willis C. Bullard, Jr.	1st District	Milford	Rm. H166
1995-1996	Rep. Willis C. Bullard, Jr.	1st District	Milford	Rm. H166
1997-1998	Spk. Curtis Hertel	2nd District	Detroit	Rm. H162
1999-2000	Spk. Charles R. Perricone	61st District	Kalamazoo	Rm. H164
2001-2002	Spk. Rick Johnson	102nd District	LeRoy	Rm. H166
2003-2004	Spk. Rick Johnson	102nd District	LeRoy	Rm. H166
2005-2006	Spk. Craig M. DeRoche	38th District	Novi	Rm. H164
2007-2008	Spk. Andy Dillon	17th District	Redford Twp.	Rm. H166
2009-2010	Spk. Andy Dillon	17th District	Redford Twp.	Rm. H164
2011-2012	Spk. James "Jase" Bolger	63rd District	Marshall	Rm. H164
2013-2014	Spk. James "Jase" Bolger	63rd District	Marshall	Rm. H164
2015-2016	Spk. Kevin Cotter	99th District	Mt. Pleasant	Rm. H164
2017-2018	Spk. Tom Leonard	93rd District	DeWitt	Rm. H164
2019-2020	Spk. Lee Chatfield	107th District	Levering	Rm. H162



End Notes

- 1 The southernmost room on the east side of the corridor, which is today part of the Speaker's Office, was initially part of the State Treasurer's suite. Completely separated from the State Land Office, it flowed into the east wing through a small arched passageway that was later bricked in. The ornamental arch is still visible in the west wall of the State Treasurer's Office, now H141.
- 2 *The Red Book for the Thirtieth Legislature of the State of Michigan*. W.S. George & Co., State Printers and Binders, 1879, p. 516.
- 3 *Michigan Official Directory and Legislative Manual for the Years 1913-1914*, p. 83.
- 4 *Annual Report of the Auditor General of the State of Michigan for the Fiscal Year Ending Sept. 30, 1879*. W.S. George & Co., State Printers and Binders, 1879, p. 37.
- 5 *The Evening News*, January 2, 1879.
- 6 *Annual Report of the Board of State Auditors for the State of Michigan for the Year 1892*. Robert Smith & Co., State Printers and Binders, 1892, p. 514.
- 7 *Seventy-third and Final Report of the Commissioner of the Land Office of the State of Michigan for the Six Months Ending December 31, 1914*. Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co., State Printers, 1916, p. 22.
- 8 *Michigan Official Directory and Legislative Manual for the Years 1913-1914*, p. 78.
- 9 State of Michigan, Department of Treasury. "Capitol Space and Contents Survey," 1941.
- 10 State of Michigan, Department of Treasury. "Capitol Space and Contents Survey," 1943.
- 11 State of Michigan, Michigan State Administrative Board Buildings and Construction Division. "Capitol Survey," George R. Page, 1957.
- 12 *Michigan Official Directory and Legislative Manual for the Years 1913-1914*, p. 82.
- 14 *Michigan Legislative Handbooks*, 1965-1990.
- 15 *Michigan Legislative Handbooks*, 1993-2020.



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